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ABSTRACT

Factors that influence principals in decisions related to violence in schools were studied through semi-structured interviews with 12 junior high school principals in a large western Canadian school district. Participants were selected on the basis of their known involvement in school violence prevention initiatives. Several decision-making process components were identified: (1) identifying the problem; (2) responding to internal and external influences; (3) making decisions; and (4) evaluating decisions based on perceived outcomes. The principals interviewed conceptualized violence not as a problem, but as a symptom and response by students to unfulfilled needs that could often be met by the school. These principals made their decisions based on their expectations of what an excellent schooling experience would offer the students and what the role of the school staff would be in providing this experience. Principals used many sources of influence and personal beliefs as filters through which they prioritized problem areas and determined the best course of action. (Contains 43 references.) (SLD)

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Linking Leadership and Decision Making to the School Violence Issue

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Linking Leadership and Decision Making to the School Violence Issue

Irene M. MacDonald, Ph.D.

Scope and Objectives

Despite differing views on the true nature and extent of school violence, there is a general consensus that schools must provide students with a safe learning environment. With the emergence of site-based management, principals are playing a more direct role in responding to growing pressures to facilitate such an environment. Unfortunately, practice has often preceded research, due in part, to the difficulties associated with evaluating such a complex social issue as violence, the demands of parents and the public for "quick action," as well as inconsistent accounts of the nature and extent of violence in schools (e.g., MacDonald, 1997). Is the proliferation of violence prevention initiatives and resources motivated by a perceived need or political pressures? Are principals exercising leadership in this area, or followership of media hype? How many decision-making strategies are born from the personal value system of these principals, or from pedagogical perspectives?

Simon (1993) suggested that decision making is a three-pronged process that involves: (a) determining what the problem is, (b) conceptualizing possible solutions to problems that have been prioritized, and (c) evaluating and choosing from amongst a variety of problem solution strategies. How do principals problemitize violence? How do they choose from amongst the various solutions? What influences such decisions? Choosing between punitive or preventative models, school or classroom initiatives, pre-packaged or customized resources, are examples of the range of decisions principals face in their efforts to respond to growing concerns over violence in schools. For example, are principals influenced by a motivation to control students, or to empower students to control themselves; or address codes of behaviour and discipline policies from the standpoint of benefiting all students, versus punishing a few? It is from within this framework of dialectic views, that the research question for this study emerged: What influences principals in decisions related to violence in schools?

The theoretical framework linking decision making with school violence integrated both the processes involved, as well as the influences, that shaped and reshaped these processes. This framework linked personal perspectives on such issues as: (a) role definition, (b) criteria of effective schools, and (c) the rights of students. These constituted "internal influences" which consciously or unconsciously affected principal's decisions regarding school violence prevention. The environment in which principals operated (i.e., external influences) was seen to continually define and redefine: (a) how principals identified problems, (b) the degree to which they shared leadership, (c) chose

amongst alternatives, and (d) rationalized decisions. I believe this process to be dynamic; the points of influence - many and contextual.

If we agree that principals are responsible for how others interpret what is important in the life of the school (Deal & Peterson, 1990) and that the choices that they make and the behaviours that they model play a critical role in institutionalizing the vision of the schools (Starratt, 1995), then examining what influences decisions related to violence in schools is a significant research problem to investigate.

Review of Related Literature

In Alberta, Canada's model of site based management, the principal plays a key role in influencing the direction that their school will take in adopting strategies to enhance safety and prevent violence. For example, principals can choose to: (a) encourage programs and practices that focus on the prevention of serious disruptive behaviours; (b) rehabilitate those students who are affected by such behaviours; or (c) support a retributive model, designed to control and discipline disruptive behaviours; and (d) increase the monitoring of student behaviour, through such measures as surveillance cameras.

Adding to the complexity of principals' choices is a lack of consensus regarding effective strategies to prevent or respond to school violence. Criminologists and police, for example, believe that the swiftness and certainty of punishment are more influential than the severity of the punishment (Gabor, 1995). In line with this thinking, zero tolerance policies which seek to punish or suppress serious disruptive or violent behaviours gained popularity in the early nineties (e.g., Alberta School Boards Association, 1993; British Columbia Teachers' Federation, 1994). Researchers, however (e.g., Hargreaves, Earl, & Ryan, 1996; Toby, 1993) have challenged the effectiveness of punitive responses suggesting that "hard line" tactics often contribute to a climate wherein violent and disruptive behaviours flourish. Students have indicated (e.g., MacDonald, 1997) that a hard-line tactic often punishes the majority of students those who are not engaged in violent or disruptive behaviours by the repressive environment created and loss of rights (e.g., freedom of assembly, speech). Gour's (1988) study on educators' perceptions of student rights (as reflected in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms) found significant differences between teachers' and principals' responses. For example, although 91.9% of respondent teachers felt that they had the privilege of refusing to teach disruptive students, only 67.9% of principals agreed. Principals were also split on the issue of the explicit right of schools to use whatever measures were deemed necessary to control students (53.6% agreed, 46.4% disagreed). Comments of the respondents revealed that such decisions would have to be based on "reason," "legitimacy," or "whatever is necessary," thus demonstrating a range of personal beliefs rather than compliance with known regulations.

The solutions chosen to address a problem, as well as the intended purpose of such choices are usually an aggregate of many perspectives and values (Hoy & Miskel, 1993). Personal experience, values, and

knowledge, as well as social pressures play a very large role in what Sergiovanni (1992) termed the "mindscapes" of how we interpret and resolve problems. For a principal, the values of responsibility, fairness, rights, freedoms, and child advocacy often compete with the demands of the law, the community, and what could be a different point of view expressed by research findings. Continued constraints on delivering quality, cost effective education often demands choices between what is a fair, a just, an expedient or a popular decision.

Increasingly, school administrators are challenged to balance conflicting principles and competing interests in their efforts to achieve the "best" course of action, which meets the approval of their many publics. With the involvement of more stakeholders in the decision-making process, it is not clear whether principals are being pressured to compromise amongst competing interests that are both internal to (e.g., students) as well as external (e.g., neighbours) to the educational system. Added to these external or environmental pressures, personal values shaped by life experiences impact upon the interpretation of various issues and ultimately influence decisions related to various issues.

Increased concern over violence has challenged schools to determine how to best respond to and prevent violent behaviours amongst students. Particularly in those districts with site-based management, the leadership in this area has rested with the school principal. Unfortunately, decisions are often made without the benefit of reflection, or sound guidance (Enns, 1981; Holmes, 1986; Walker, 1994). Compounded by parental and community pressure to deal with issues (e.g., violence), expediency is often the chosen course. Only a small number of administrators who are pressured into "doing something" about school violence have either the time or expertise to choose appropriate programs or evaluate their effectiveness (Posner, 1994).

Greenfield (1985, 1991) argued that lack of time was not the only factor. Of greater influence, he believed, was the lack of moral reasoning applied in administrative decisions.

Campbell's work (1994) supported Greenfield's observations and she concluded that dilemmas such as those faced in the disciplining of students, are too often addressed by using "ethically neutral problem solving strategies." Hodgkinson (1991) identified this as a natural inclination to resolve value conflict at the lowest level of value hierarchy (e.g., preferences). For example, the value laden dilemma to balance the needs of student victims and perpetrators of violence becomes relegated to following district policy (e.g., zero tolerance). Campbell suggested that administrators often framed dilemmas as managerial, not ethical or moral. They therefore approached problems on the level of "conflict resolution strategies, consequences of efficiency and effectiveness, community and public relations schemes, procedural guidelines, and formative directives" (p.7). For those principals who are personally committed to addressing the needs of all students, they are often faced with having to set aside their ethical reasoning and answer to laws, policies, and duties that are externally imposed. Marshall (1992) explained this as "the fundamental chronic tensions in public schooling" (p. 381).

At some point in the cognitive process, a decision is reached and it is at this stage that language gives meaning and context to the decision. Decisions can be rationalized using expressions such as "I had no choice," "its what my gut tells me is right," or "I did what I was told to do." As one principal stated in Campbell's study, "I have to make a fast decision before I get confused by all my conflicting values" (p. 8).

The "ideal" approach principals should follow in making strategic decisions can be inferred by a review of the literature. Sergiovanni (1994), for example, suggested that leaders who recognized that values lie at the core of their decisions exercised "moral leadership" demonstrated by a genuine desire to include all members of the school community in the decision-making process. Unfortunately, if unmanaged, such shared leadership can often lead to inaction, as the desire to reach consensus impedes implementation (Deal & Peterson, 1994).

In relation to school violence, Kadel and Follam (1993) maintained that the principal plays a key role in creating a school climate and culture that rejects violent behaviours. In their study of Florida schools, Kadel and Follam noted a reduction in antisocial behaviours in those schools whose principals maintained a high profile and placed a high priority on establishing caring relationships with the staff and students. In their view, successful principals make the effort to build relationships with their students, and were seen as visible leaders, who take the time to know the school community.

Method

Data Source

This study utilized a semi-structured interview to gather insights from 12 junior high school principals in one large Western Canadian school district. As a topic, school violence elicits responses that are often value laden and very much related to one's views on many ancillary issues (e.g., role of the school, tolerance of misbehaviour, models of discipline). For this reason, interview questions were in large part unstructured so as to allow respondents to introduce and expand upon those sub-issues that they deemed most important. The interviews were audio taped by the researcher and later transcribed by a university secretary.

The participants were purposefully selected on the basis of their known involvement in school violence prevention initiatives (e.g., request for resources, participation in professional development, membership on committees addressing violence prevention). Theoretical sampling did not take place since a finite number of principals were pre selected by the source who suggested their names. A purposive sample, as well as efforts made to test the soundness of emerging theories, by follow-up telephone discussions with the participants as to whether emergent "theories" resonated with their own perspectives, partially compensated for the lack of theoretical sampling.

The schools represented a mix of socio-economic strata: four drew their student population from largely middle to upper income, white neighbourhoods, five were known as "high needs schools" with multiethnic, low income neighbourhoods, and the remainder were middle income, multiethnic schools. The schools identified as "high needs" were located in areas of the city with low income housing, higher than the average crime rates, a transient population - many of whom were on social assistance.

All schools but one, were configured as grades 7-9 schools. There was a range of experience in the principalship, from 9 months to 15 years. Each had been assigned to their current school for under 5 years. Both genders were represented in the interviewed sample.

Data Analysis

Techniques described in Glaser and Strauss's (1967) method of grounded theory: (a) open coding, (b) theoretical memoing, (d) interpretive diagramming to reflect theoretical "hunches," were used to guide the research method used in this study. Transcripts were reduced into increasingly smaller units of analysis, from broad based themes (e.g., safe school) into: (a) concepts (e.g., school climate), (b) items (e.g., codes of conduct), and (c) characters (e.g., references to parents, staff, students).

As an analytical tool, the use of memoing provides a method of organizing ideas and relationships amongst and between data. As Strauss (1987) stated, this becomes especially important when the volume of data increases and theoretical concepts take shape. This memoing can take the form of textual or graphic representation. The latter is known as integrative diagramming (Strauss, 1987) and was used extensively in the formulation of concepts and theories in this study.

Additional themes were identified by revisiting the transcripts three times. A tentative theoretical framework was developed on the basis of literature reviewed, as well as my own prior research conducted in the area of school violence (e.g., MacDonald, 1995; MacDonald, 1997). The theoretical model and substantive theory were discussed with the 12 participants who provided feedback and suggestions for minor revisions.

Results

The following pages describe the emergent themes resulting from the coding and analysis of the interview transcripts. Excerpts from the transcripts are used to offer additional insights or emphases.

Conceptualizing the Problem

When asked to define violence, as it related to their school, principals found the question difficult to answer largely because they saw "violence" as encompassing a wide range of behaviours. Principals suggested that the difficulty of definition was a consequence of two factors: (a) their belief that violence was a symptom of other problems and (b) the fluidity of the term, resulting from the range of tolerance found in the school

community. For example, one principal noted that parents often "normalized" behaviours that school staff considered inappropriate:

> They (parents) do label some of this stuff political correctness. They think the sexual teasing is part of normal growing up and that they did it, it's okay. They really don't believe that it hurts kids.

So too, what one principal might consider an "inappropriate adolescent act" (e.g., swearing at a peer) was often cast as "violent" behaviour by those staff who had a zero tolerance attitude towards a student's lack of self control.

Zero tolerance was an important concept for principals to expand upon. In their view, it represented a policy interpretation that was taking two different directions in schools: as a mechanism to remove problem students, or the "zero avoidance" (MacDonald, 1997b) of inappropriate behaviours (i.e., all misbehaviour will be acted upon). All twelve principals in this study took the latter view, and were emphatic and unyielding in their reasons for it:

> I'm certainly going to make a mistake some days, and if I make a mistake, how do I want to be treated? Do I want to be roasted and walked down the street in a parade, or would I like somebody to show some compassion and appreciation for the good things that I've been able to do along the way? If I'd like to be treated that way, then perhaps other people might like to be treated that way.

Influences on Decisions Related to School Violence

The findings presented were drawn from remarks explicitly stated by principals, as well as those concepts inferred by connecting related themes during data analysis. The four dominant areas of influence were principals': (a) perceived role of schools, (b) personal perspectives on their own leadership role, and (c) philosophies underlying preferred practice.

Role of Schools. Public education has received mixed reviews of late, and the proliferation of books on the topic suggests that we are still grappling with the objectives and outcomes of schooling (e.g., Postman's *Failure of Schools, 1995*). On the one hand, government is trying to compete internationally in such areas as math proficiency, while corporations exact pressure for schools to graduate students with more relevant work skills. The disparities found between socio-economic conditions, has also pressured schools to address the physical and emotional needs of children, ranging from providing hot lunches, to mentorship programs.

Against this backdrop of often competing perspectives on the role of schools, the principals in this study believed that, in the junior high school environment, curriculum played a secondary role:

> there are some staff who still have a 25 year old belief that their job at school is to deliver programs and fetch back some information so don't worry about the personalities that are involved, don't worry about rights because kids don't have any.

> ...I'd be crucified if I said that the curriculum content wasn't important, but the whole person is more important... it's the process of kids working together and learning how to do that, that's really critical.

As a microcosm of society, schools not only reflected its values but were bastions of hope for changing values. In the junior high school setting, principals believed that schools had a critical responsibility to impart more than academic knowledge.

Principals were keenly aware of the changing dynamics of the family, and although they understood that it was often deemed beyond the formal purview of schools to do so, they were prepared and committed to filling the gap left by those homes that did not always provide adequate emotional support for their children. By offering a sense of belonging and community, schools could influence students in ways that were more sustainable than any set of rules could offer. Schools were seen as service providers and as such, principals felt that parents especially, had a right to demand the commitment and involvement of staff in providing a safe and caring learning environment for their children.

Views on Leadership. Principals understood the daunting task posed by trying to meet the social, emotional, as well as academic needs of students. At a minimum, they saw their role as a visible leader, whose sense of caring for students was not bound by time, place, or traditional views on the role of the principal. Thus, they made a concerted effort to increase contact with students by participating in extracurricular activities. Coaching a sports teams, for example, was viewed as a way of putting aside "the paperwork" in favour of exercising visible leadership.

Notwithstanding principals' motivation to preserve a high visibility with students, administrative demands often imposed a constraint on their ability to do so. One principal spoke of the frustration of the job, expressing feelings of anxiety at the high frequency of meetings that took her away from the school. She struggled with the changes in the district that imposed administrative and managerial tasks which compromised her ability to know the students. However, when the opportunity presented itself, principals made every attempt to demonstrate their commitment to students. Maintaining visible contact with students in the school and in the community, was also regarded as an integral component of the principal's role:

> They've got to see you. They've got to see you daily and they've got to see you on the holiday and they've got to see you outside. That's just a given, because if they don't see you and all they see you is in here [school] forget it. It doesn't work.

Although limited by having to deal with the daily demands of administrative tasks, principals made every effort to forge relationships with students:

> I talk to them [students] about drinking. Their drinking on weekends. Well, we had quite a discussion. "This is none of your business." And I said: "Maybe you're right. I'm concerned about you. . .it is my business if this comes into the school. It is my business if you're planning your Friday night activities Friday afternoon in our school."

Respondents spoke of the continuing need to change attitudes of those staff who could not appreciate the importance of caring about the work habits, time management or social skill development of students. A commitment to students, and a genuine desire to relate to them, was a philosophy they intentionally modelled to staff in their belief that "all things important, start at the top".

Philosophies of Discipline. Discipline was not seen as a form of punishment for misbehaviour. There was no mention of discipline as a deterrent or as retributive. Rather, any sanctions that were place on students were seen as a way of teaching them about the choices they made, and the consequences of their behaviours.

The uniqueness of each situation, and the special needs of individual students drove decisions regarding measures taken when students acted in a violent or disruptive manner. The traditional method of uniformly applied standards and preset consequences were abandoned in favour of using discretion and understanding. Different approaches and sensitivity to the "baggage" that students often brought to school resulted in an effort by principals to build trust, respect and understanding between and amongst staff and students. Consistency was not viewed as equal consequences for similar misbehaviour, but rather equally applied compassion, and attention to the needs of all students: victims, perpetrators and witnesses:

> When I came, the first thing that I said was, if you want a strong disciplinarian: if you look that word up in the dictionary it talks about enforcer, autocratic; and I said you've got the wrong person... every situation is different and so when we're dealing with kids on discipline issues we will deal with each individual. Look at the child, the situation, and then deal with it so that it is what's best for that kid.

Although each school had a written set of behavioural expectations, there was a deliberate de-emphasis on rules:

> ...you have a list on the left side of crimes and a list on the right side of exactly the recipe for punishment for those things: they don't work very well...Are we really student-centered, do we really respect the people? If the answer is "yes" then we'd better not be using terms like "I'm the authority in this classroom, and if you don't like it then get out." As soon as we're using those kinds of things...we're not working in a caring culture.

Principals did not want to relinquish their judgement rights to policy rights. Their job as principal and leader was to make decisions in the best interests of children. In their view, punishment was no panacea. Each participant recognized that an overemphasis on rules led to increased tension with students, as they attempted to test, break, or challenge rules with little sense of understanding or ownership of their actions. Rather, students were encouraged to participate in developing a sense of community and in so doing, gain control and ownership for their own behaviour and that of others:

> ...the bottom line - all we have for rules is: we treat people with respect. So we try to build that and that really is where we come from with violence. I don't get too hung up on violence. It's not a big issue. It just isn't.

Principals saw discipline as a positive approach to preparing students for adulthood by instilling in them a set of values, life and social skills. These, they believed, could not be achieved by forcing students to follow rules for the sake of compliance with authority:

> ...if you don't have a whole bunch of rules, that makes them [students] think about it... I would far sooner give them latitude and make them think about it so that it becomes a part of them...so they think about how this [misbehaviour] affects people.

Personal beliefs. The reason teenagers came to school was to be with their friends. As a group, teenagers often acquired an attitude of self-importance and a belief that the world revolved around them. What they needed was someone to understand the way that they were, and talk to them, not harass them or "pull rank." Unfortunately, adults (e.g., teachers and parents) often forget that 13 and 14 year olds are still young and underdeveloped in terms of social skills. Too often, as one participant pointed out, adults forget what it was like to be a teenager: knowing that despite their mistakes, they would be cared for and forgiven. Thus, approaches to discipline were typically based on the need to view misbehaviour as an opportunity to acquire appropriate social skills:

> ...its not a situation where you bring them in, you yell and scream and say you've done this and don't do it again and we send them off. Its a teaching opportunity and its a learning opportunity for the kid. Kids when they're growing up are going to make mistakes and I say that a hundred times a week. They make a mistake, okay so now we need to help them grow and learn from the mistake.

Participants spoke fondly of teenagers and expressed a deep appreciation for the struggles that they were facing, as well the need for schools to elevate the image of young people in the community:

> As adults, we expect so much of kids and when you go to the golf course, they'll go on "Oh those kids are so bad nowadays, hey, wooo man; they're fighting and they're doing all this bad stuff." Hey hold on. We have great kids here at (school name). They come to school to learn.

Principals believed that there were key benefits derived from efforts directed at raising the image of teenagers: (a) building students' self esteem, and (b) demonstrating to adults that their school's students were responsible, contributing members of the community. Providing opportunities to succeed and recognizing efforts to succeed, were ways in which students acquired a belief in themselves. As an example, one principal showed me the new banner that would hang at the entrance to the school. It read: "Through these halls walk champions."

Personal beliefs, that influenced needs' assessment, seemed to be closely linked to options that would not be considered viable (e.g., zero tolerance practices and rule driven discipline). Zero tolerance as a means of removing students through suspension or expulsion was viewed as a failure to meet the needs of students. Principals felt that they had a personal responsibility and obligation to look after their students and they were not prepared to pass the problem on to another school. "Throwing kids out" for misbehaviour was not the answer, nor was it perceived as a measure of successfully reducing school violence. Rather, it was viewed as a failure of school staff to address the needs of kids:

> Two of the teachers were very, very happy that this had happened. In fact, there was almost cheering and I said: "You know, this is the only business that I know of where we cheer if we lose a customer."

Decision Making

To this point, I have presented the findings relevant to: (a) principals' conceptualization of school violence, and (b) the primary influences on decisions related to school violence. In the following section, two areas: identifying needs, and validating options, will be discussed. These related to research question: *What processes are involved in making decisions to address school violence?*

Identifying Needs. An awareness and understanding for the unique needs of adolescent students influenced many of the strategies principals introduced or supported. Knowledge of what those needs would be were drawn from principals' personal beliefs and those facilitative processes they arranged that would best determine needs (e.g., fireside chats).

Although principals did not discount the desirability of dealing proactively with issues, they felt that basing decisions on identified needs was more realistic. As one principal stated: "I'm not going to go out there preventing violence, I'm going out there to build a great school."

Facilitating a Decision-making Process

Students. Giving students "voice" was a way of validating decisions being considered by principals. Concerted efforts to understand students' needs, as well as valuing their opinions of school effectiveness were addressed in many ways:

> We've been working at giving students increased voice. So one of the things that I did and it grew out of kids in the classroom talking to kids, I met with ten kids from each room of the school. So there were 25 periods meeting with kids in terms of what they saw as problems in the schools and what they saw in the streets and how they would like to grow and change.

Students were seen as a part of the co-operative enterprise of schooling, and as such deserved respect and input into those decisions which affected them. Their contribution to the learning environment was considered invaluable and principals often found students to be an ideal sounding board for the

new strategies that staff were considering. Many of the strategies of opening dialogue with students were rooted in the desire to provide a school that was built on healthy relationships and a sense of belonging to a community.

At first, one principal acknowledged that students were suspicious of the invitation to share their concerns or suggestions. In time, after realizing that many of their ideas had been acted upon, students became convinced that the administration was genuinely trying to identify and meet their needs.

Staff. One of the most important strategies that principals employed to enable effective decision making was in selecting staff who shared their beliefs about students and the role of schools. Towards this end, they played a lead role in the hiring process itself and establishing selection criteria that closely aligned with their personal views. One female principal reflected on the personal satisfaction that arose from hiring 13 teachers last year, all of whom shared her views of children. These were staff who had proven, over the past year, that they could relate to students and engage them in "things that mattered." In her view, potential candidates had to demonstrate a genuine desire to challenge students to be their best. Hiring the "right people" allowed principals to be confident in knowing that their staff could be given a good deal of autonomy and that they could be trusted to "get the right job done."

Although principals recognized that students were expected to acquire subject knowledge, they also felt that life skills and emotional literacy were just as critical. Determining what those specific skills would be, was largely a factor of what the perceived "hot spots" were. Principals relied on the judgement and knowledge of their staff to best determine those needs. As one example, students were having difficulties in concentrating in afternoon classes. Although the principal suspected as much, he consulted with staff to verify that a number of students regularly came to school without a lunch. Undernourished, these students found it difficult to perform well in their afternoon classes, and were often the perpetrators of disruptive or aggressive behaviours. It was subsequently decided that the school would provide a "hot lunch" program. The identification of this need and the implementation of related strategies would not have been possible without a close working relationship between the staff and principal.

Principals spoke of connecting students and staff, forming attachments, and setting up channels of communication. They suggested that schools would never succeed in solving problems if relationships did not exist to provide a context, a background to understanding the problem.

The way people are treated, the assumptions made about behaviour, the manner in which staff and students communicate, care, and trust one another, were deemed essential ingredients of relationship building that principals identified. Each of the principals highly valued their staff, and as such ensured that some form of collaborative decision making took place:

> I mean I don't purport to have all the answers and I don't say "well this is how it's going to be and you put up or shut up". . .but unless we have the same common set of beliefs and values, we don't have a decision-making process.

Summary of Results

Identifying the needs of students enabled a decision-making process that could better meet those needs (e.g., academic, emotional, social) which resulted in an improved school climate and positive public relations.

Principals admitted that few decisions were based on eliminating or preventing violence. Rather, they saw decisions driven by addressing needs and working towards specific outcomes: (a) meeting the social and academic needs of students, which required and resulted in trust and respect; (b) meeting the needs of students, which required establishing meaningful relationships and resulted in increased student "voice," less disruptive behaviours, and a better teaching and learning environment; (c) building meaningful relationships and facilitated an understanding of the needs of students, which resulted in a positive school climate, recognized and appreciated by parents and the larger community.

Conclusions and Discussion

Much of current literature regarding violence in schools addresses the nature and extent of the problem or effective strategies to prevent or respond to violence. Although the role of the principal in implementing safe school strategies has been identified (e.g., Kadel & Follam, 1993; Posner, 1994), little attention has been paid to the issue of how principals make such decisions in the first place.

The 12 principals interviewed in this study shared their experiences and, in doing so, provided insights into a model of decision making that touched upon areas beyond those of violence. By offering their perspectives on what influenced their decisions, several process components were identified: (a) identifying the "problem," (b) responding to internal and external influences, (c) making decisions, and (d) evaluating decisions based on perceived outcomes.

In the study, principals conceptualized violence, not as a problem, but as a symptom and response by students to unfulfilled needs that could often be met by the school. This was a view shared by Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996), Shostak (1986), Toby (1993), and Yonker (1983), who indicated that school violence

stemmed from: (a) unresolved conflict, (b) anger, (c) boredom, (d) rejection, and (e) unattended emotional needs. Identifying and assessing such multiple needs of students was not an easy task, according to the principals in my study. It required a concerted effort to recognize that multiple influences were often at play: (a) the home environment, (b) individual student's strengths and shortcomings, and (c) the dynamics of peer influences. Perhaps one student needed a different approach than another student. In the end, however, the goal was always "to be doing it better and more caring and more sensitive than before."

Reframing the problem to a larger field than that of school violence, does not suggest that principals did not engage in violence prevention strategies or programs. Instead, principals made deliberate decisions that were based on their expectations of what an excellent schooling experience would offer students, and what the role of school staff would be in providing such an experience. Moreover, they did not make such decisions in a vacuum, lacking knowledge or understanding of what programs were available in the area of school violence. On the contrary, principals were well aware of what resources were available. Instead, they used many sources of influence and personal beliefs as a filter through which they prioritized problem areas and determined the optimum course of action.

Leithwood and Stager's (1989) work concluded that in the absence of problem relevant information, or when problems were considered unique, principals used values and principles in problem solving. In those problem areas where much was known, they indicated that the value basis of problem solving was rarely acknowledged. The findings from my own study do not support such conclusions. Principals were considered to be well informed about the problem of school violence and felt that it was not a unique issue. Rather, their experience and knowledge suggested that too many schools had failed to recognize and attend to the underlying causes of violence.

Participants in this study believed that the junior high schooling experience must be a balance between (a) meeting the academic requirements of the curriculum and (b) the development of social skills. This could only be realized by recognizing and alleviating a number of perceived obstacles. For example, an overemphasis on rules and unfair consequences for misbehaviour did not provide students with the opportunity to learn self discipline. Consistent with the views of Reed and Strahan (1995), Toby (1993), and Weissglass (1995), principals elected to develop expectations for behaviours that would be modelled by staff and encouraged in students, as opposed to creating and enforcing more rules.

Leithwood and Steinbach (1991) suggested that: "What principals do depends on what they think." In expressing the personal beliefs and values that guided discipline policies, or the hiring criteria of staff, principals demonstrated that the internal (personal) influences were more instrumental in guiding their decisions, than the pressures from the community, staff, or district (exter ıal influences). An opposition to implementing district zero tolerance policies exemplifies this focus on internal influences.

Personal values seemed to play an important role in the decision making which influenced the climate of the school. Influence, in the context of this study, referred to "the ability of an individual to affect

the thoughts, emotions, and/or actions of one or more persons" (Gunn & Holdaway, 1986, p. 48). In order to exercise this influence, principals chose to adopt a "hands-on" approach to their role. For example, they incorporated their personal values into the hiring criteria of staff and often set aside administrative tasks so as to personally deal with students. There was no attempt to be remote, uninvolved, or distanced from ethical dilemmas (e.g., dealing with an abused student, unprofessional staff behaviour). On the contrary, principals extended their reach beyond the school premises and school hours (e.g., teen drinking, fighting off school grounds). In all of these actions, principals were guided by a desire to play a lead role in shaping what Leiber and Rogers (1994) considered to be "a paradigm shift in the mission of schooling, the teaching-learning process, and the perception and treatment of children" (p. 63).

Leadership

Deal and Peterson (1994) stressed the importance of multidimensional leadership which sees one strategy or initiative as serving many purposes. For example, a lunch time sports program could serve the structural goal of providing students with something to do, and at the same time, present the opportunity for teachers and students to build meaningful relationships outside of the formal classroom setting. Evidence in this study suggested that leadership was multidimensional.

Whereas multidimensional leadership can be an indicator of effectiveness, Bolman and Deal (1992) suggested that the contextual nature of leadership requires different patterns of thinking for different situations. In trying to position decision making on issues of school violence vis-à-vis other decisions that principals make, Bolman and Deal's assertion was useful to explore. Although discussions with principals in my study addressed structural issues such as policies, planning, and evaluation, the dominant leadership orientation was more inclined towards the symbolic, political, values, and relationship frames. Principals spoke of the need to advocate for students (i.e., political frame), their personal philosophy of discipline (i.e., value frame), the need to establish meaningful relationships in schools (i.e., relationship frame), and to a larger degree the need to build a vision of schooling based on moral leadership (i.e., symbolic frame).

Experience

In so far as determining what influence the professional experience of principals had on decisions to address school violence, it seems that their leadership capabilities were developed long before they became administrators. Although the majority had pursued graduate studies, and demonstrated a commitment to ongoing professional development, their personal qualities of caring, and commitment to children were developed as teachers. In the eyes of the source who provided their names, they personified the values of Sergiovanni's (1992) notion of professionalism:

> The term professionalism was derived from the religious setting, where it pertained to the public statement of what one believed and was committed to...

> Professionalism could be understood as competence plus virtue. . .as commitment to the professional ideal of exemplary practice in the service of valued social ends. (p. 68)

Processes

In regards to the principals in this study, insights into what the merit of various options were, came from a number of sources: (a) by reading journals on middle schools, (b) seeking students' perceptions, and (c) hiring and empowering "like-minded" staff. Walking the halls, inviting dialogue with students, coaching team sports, and actively encouraging meaningful relationships between staff and students also provided principals with the opportunity to validate their personal views on what needed to be done. They did this directly and informally. This quality was what Bennis (1984) described as "the ability to read the souls of others in a fashion that raises human consciousness, builds meaning, and inspires human intent" (p. 70). In part, that "intent" was to have a vision (e.g., a school which meets the emotional and academic needs of students), to make known one's values and beliefs (e.g., publicly stated position on zero tolerance), to build support among like-minded people (e.g., hiring staff), and to involve as many people as possible in enabling this vision (e.g., communicating with students, parents, staff).

In his work with administrators, Conway (1984) found several variations existed in administrators' practice of participative decision making: mandated versus voluntary, formal versus informal, and direct versus indirect processes. The concern for school leaders, he noted, was knowing when to apply each of these variations. In this study, principals were willing to accommodate the views of others, and encouraged participation in deciding from a choice of options that were based on their own beliefs. Leithwood and Steinbach (1991) put forward a definition of empowerment that is particularly useful in this discussion. They suggested that empowerment was associated with "greater discretion for teachers to shape their own work, a central role for teachers in significant school level decisions..." (p. 223). From the perspective of the principals in this study, empowerment was a strategy used in those circumstances where others had already "bought into" their vision. Hiring like-minded staff was viewed as an effective way of ensuring that empowerment would achieve principals' goals. Principals had faith that, in the end, a decision would be reached based on the best interests of students. This was guided by a confidence in the capabilities of those staff that they had personally hired.

For the principals in this study, leadership style and the decision-making process were inseparable to the extent that the former influenced the latter. Empowering others to seek strategies or resources need to ameliorate a problem were successful because principals exercised a leadership style that would: (a) ensure that staff, students, and parents were committed to shared goals and purposes, (b) provide opportunities for staff and students to find creative ways of dealing with problems, (c) foster a caring, trusting, and harmonious teaching-learning environment, and (d) support, inspire and appreciate the exemplary efforts of staff and students. This leadership style was what principals referred to as "planting seeds," "empowerment," " and

nudging them along." Starratt (1995) described this as institutionalizing the vision and expressing the school's core values. Sergiovanni (1994) referred to this as "moral leadership," demonstrated by a genuine desire to include all members of the school community in the decision-making process.

Principals recognized problems, identified the outcomes of decisions, responded to the needs of others, took risks, and were prepared to delegate decision making to those who they knew shared the same vision of schooling and education.

Huberman and Miles (1984) offered two reasons for innovative change: to solve a particular problem, or to address an identified gap in performance. The findings from this study offer a third motivation which is oriented more towards individual leadership qualities than on broad based organizational theory. Exemplary leaders are motivated in their decision making by a desire to create an environment which achieves, at the minimum, an equilibrium between their personal beliefs and values and those of the other members of the organization.

Implications and Recommendations

When asked what would make a positive difference in their schooling experience, junior high school students (e.g., MacDonald, 1995; 1997) suggested that in lieu of increasing sanctions and punitive consequences for misbehaviour, a greater emphasis should be placed on the learning of prosocial behaviours, such as acceptable strategies for dealing with conflicts. Students also reflected on their desire to see a kinder and gentler approach to their misbehaviour. Moreover, they believed that school discipline based on punishments and increased sanctions, contributed to a climate of discontent and an increase in misbehaviour. This opinion was shared by the principals in this study, and inspired a more humanistic model of discipline for precisely those reasons.

The contribution that this study makes is to position school violence as an educational issue involving the entire school community. As an educational issue, decisions that principals make provide insights into the role of schooling, the values and beliefs underpinning discipline policies, characteristics of exemplary leadership, effective decision-making strategies, and the elements of a safe and caring school climate.

Identifying the issue as broader than that of school violence and refocusing energies on defining those characteristics of students and the school ethos that result in safe environment may be a more worthwhile endeavour. If school districts and individual schools were to focus on those broader problems, rather than the symptom, more relevant strategies might be adopted. I would submit that achieving a safe teaching and learning environment requires strategies which should not be limited to just responding to violence when it occurs, through sanctions (e.g., detentions, suspensions, expulsions). Rather, discipline,

when necessary, should be regarded as an opportunity to teach "a better way." For the principals in this study, positioning violence as a symptom of other issues (e.g., boredom, frustration, alienation) provided opportunities for preventative strategies which long preceded the types of serious incidents that often encourage the media hype surrounding school violence. If governments provided schools with the resources required to effectively deal with the multifaceted needs of the teaching-learning cycle, perhaps teachers would not have to resort to dealing with the aftermath (i.e., violence), often responding in a piecemeal way to complex issues which demand diagnosis, planning, evaluation, understanding, and time.

Principals in this study believed that the social and emotional development of students was an important outcome of schooling. Unfortunately, most school boards have not incorporated these into their indicators of student success. If outcomes were expanded beyond just academic indicators, the value of social skill development could be elevated. Admittedly, it is a more difficult task to assess and report on achievements in social literacy. Unless efforts in this area are acknowledged, however, schools may be reticent to devote resources to this important responsibility.

In the area of career development, school boards would be advised to also consider the criteria by which they judge a teacher to be "principal material." Personal beliefs regarding discipline (e.g., humanistic vs. control based) and an attention to student-centered endeavours would challenge some current thinking regarding school leadership. At the very least, as employers, school officials could raise the profile of such hiring criteria as identified by the principals in this study: (a) an ability to relate to students, (b) a commitment to contribute to the quality of life for students, and (c) a responsibility to model appropriate behaviours. If such criteria were established in the hiring of school staff, the preservice preparation of teachers would need to revisit their current selection criteria for entrance into the program beyond that of academic credentials.

In this study, principals stated that their district was different from others, in that exemplary teachers, those who had a proven record of related well to students, were selected for administrative positions; not those who exhibited administrative skills. In order to accommodate this different perspective on school leadership, graduate programs (often a prerequisite for administrative positions in schools), should offer courses that probe more deeply into morals, values, and philosophies of schooling, discipline and teaching.

Although processes of decision making, motivational techniques, and planned change are currently addressed in graduate programs, lectures and discussions should probe deeper into issues such as: (a) what constitutes meaningful involvement of students, (b) what role do schools play in fostering or rejecting violence, and (c) how is violence conceptualized and operationalized. If we are to believe that violence and disruptive behaviours are impacting the learning and teaching in schools, and that such concerns have escalated in the past 5 years, it stands to reason that the topics covered in teacher preparation and graduate

programs at the university level should address these so that at the very least, there is a more useful exchange of information, and a greater link between research and practice.

Final Thoughts

Although I agree that socio-economic factors, negative peer influences, lack of parental supervision, are variables that can influence youth violence, I would suggest that the increase in disruptive behaviours seen in Canadian schools could also be attributed to the conflict arising from schools which continue to prepare students for a bureaucratic workplace that is slowly disappearing. Students are exposed to daily examples of people (often their own parents) who have found success by challenging the status quo, taking risks and controlling their own destiny. Young people are encouraged, through corporate messages, to enhance their emotional intelligence, become creative problem solvers, and self actualized learners. A custodial model of schools, wherein students are (a) controlled through punitive sanctions, (b) expected to follow rules without question, (c) passive learners, and (d) not empowered to influence decisions that affect them, no longer prepares students for the demands of the corporate world.

In this study, I met 12 junior high school principals whose vision of schooling was congruent with the entrepreneurial spirit and corporate vision of the community. They were prepared to stand up for the well being of their students, often against colleagues, parents, and the central district office. These principals actively chose to extend their responsibility to students beyond the walls of the school and cast aside the traditional view of the professional as autonomous and self monitoring. They held staff accountable for their behaviours and excluded those teachers from the hiring process who did not share their beliefs on humanistic discipline and the role of schools in providing for the social and emotional development of students. These principals embraced a responsibility and concern for the well-being of their students that was not limited by the boundaries of the school property or its hours of operation.

One of the principals in this study had the following comment to make to the Grade 9 Graduating Class of 1997:

> If you haven't learned something about leaving the world a better place and turning it into a better place, all the excellence in academics is valueless. What matters when you come out of here is how we treat people and what you've learned here as to treating people. . . .

What a wonderful challenge this presents to principals and teachers. In the new millennium we will see an evolution of work and the workplace that demands new competencies and aptitudes. The rapid pace of change will likely impede the ability of schools to adequately prepare students for the careers choices they will have to make - the majority of which have yet to be defined. The central role of educational leaders will be to actively plan, inspire, direct, and motivate school communities to address new visions and goals of education. If these goals do not take into account the influence schools have in: (a) shaping the moral fabric of society, (b) elevating the status of children, and (c) inspiring young minds, then the current disenchantment with schools will only intensify.

The way in which school violence has been conceptualized and addressed in many junior high schools is a telling sign that, as adults, we are not always prepared to relinquish power, authority, and control to adolescents. Students are rarely asked to contribute in a meaningful way to the decisions that affect them. Their boredom, disruptive, and often violent, behaviours are rarely identified as symptoms of adult imposed policy solutions that alienate, frustrate, and "turn off" the very minds that schools are supposed to engage and inspire. The thrust in violence prevention initiatives in schools has been the assumption that violence is the problem, and that the only decisions remaining are: by what means should schools achieve "the end" - a reduction in violence? I prefer to view this issue as did the principals in this study: the "end" is creating a climate of caring that nourishes positive relationships, notwithstanding the challenges of schooling today's teenagers. Ultimately, the study of school violence is important, but it will only be meaningful if positioned as a study of schooling itself and the influence of leadership in decisions related to the underlying causes of violence in schools.

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